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ABBA EBAN:

Not Backward to Belligerency But Forward to Peace

Text of the address by Israel's
Foreign Minister, Mr. Abba
Eban, in the United Nations
Security Council on 6 June 1967.

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Mr. President: I have just come from Jerusalem to tell the Security Council that Israel, by its independent effort and sacrifice, has passed from serious danger to successful resistance.

Two days ago Israel's condition caused much concern across the humane and friendly world. Israel had reached a sombre hour. Let me try to evoke the point at which our fortunes stood.

An army, greater than any force ever assembled in Sinai, had massed against Israel's southern frontier. Egypt had dismissed the United Nations forces which symbolized the international interest in the maintenance of peace in our region. Nasser had provocatively brought five infantry divisions and two armoured divisions up to our very gates; 80,000 men and 900 tanks were poised to move.

Plan To Encircle Israel

A special striking force, comprising an armoured division with at least 200 tanks, was concentrated against Elath at the Negev's southern tip. Here was a clear design to cut the southern Negev off from the main body of our State. For Egypt had openly proclaimed that Elath did not form part of Israel and had predicted that Israel itself would soon expire. The proclamation was empty; the prediction now lies in ruin. While the main brunt of the hostile threat was focused on the southern front, an alarming plan of encirclement was under way. With Egypt's initiative and guidance, Israel was already being strangled in its maritime approaches to the whole eastern half of the world. For sixteen years, Israel had been illicitly denied passage in the Suez Canal, despite the Security Council's decision of 1 September 1951. And now the creative enterprise of ten patient years which had opened an international route across the Strait of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba had been suddenly and arbitrarily choked. Israel was and is breathing with only a single lung.

Jordan had been intimidated, against its better interest, into joining a defence pact. It is not a defence pact at all. It is an aggressive pact, of which I saw the consequences with my own eyes yesterday in the shells falling upon institutions of health and culture in the City of Jerusalem. Every house and street in Jerusalem came into the range of fire as a result of Jordan's adherence to this pact; so also did the

crowded and pathetically narrow coastal strip in which so much of Israel's life and population is concentrated.

Iraqi troops reinforced Jordanian units in areas immediately facing vital and vulnerable Israel communication centres. Expeditionary forces from Algeria and Kuwait had reached Egyptian territory. Nearly all the Egyptian forces which had been attempting the conquest of the Yemen had been transferred to the coming assault upon Israel. Syrian units, including artillery, overlooked the Israeli villages in the Jordan Valley. Terrorist troops came regularly into our territory to kill, plunder and set off explosions. The most recent occasion was five days ago.

Peril Confronted Israel All Around

In short, there was peril for Israel wherever it looked. Its manpower had been hastily mobilized. Its economy and commerce were beating with feeble pulse. Its streets were dark and empty. There was an apocalyptic air of approaching peril. And Israel faced this danger alone.

But not entirely alone we were buoyed up by an unforgettable surge of public sympathy across the world. Friendly Governments expressed the rather ominous hope that Israel would manage "to live." But the dominant theme of our condition was danger and solitude.

Now there could be no doubt about what was intended for us. With my very ears I heard President Nasser's speech on 28 May. He said:

"We intend to open a general assault against Israel. This will be total war. Our basic aim is the destruction of Israel."

On 2 June, the Egyptian Commander in Sinai, General Murtagi, published his order of the day, calling on his troops to wage a war of destruction against Israel. Here, then, was a systematic, overt, proclaimed design at politicide, the murder of a State.

The policy, the arms, the men had all been brought together. And the State thus threatened with collective assassination was itself the last sanctuary of a people which had seen six million of its sons exterminated by a more powerful dictator two decades before.

Blockade Could Not Be Passively Suffered

The question then widely asked in Israel and across the world was whether we had not already gone beyond the utmost point of danger. Was there any precedent in world history, for example, for a nation passively to suffer the blockade of its only southern port, involving nearly all its vital fuel, when such acts of war, legally and internationally, have always invited resistance? This was a most unusual patience. It existed because we had acceded to the suggestion of some of the maritime States that we give them scope to concert their efforts in order to find an international solution which would ensure the maintenance of free passage in the Gulf of Aqaba for ships of all nations and of all flags.

As we pursued this avenue of international solution, we wished the world to have no doubt about our readiness to exhaust every prospect, however fragile, of a diplomatic solution. And some of the prospects that were suggested were very fragile indeed.

Israel's Margin of Security Diminished

But as time went on, there was no doubt that our margin of general security was becoming smaller and smaller. Thus, on the morning of 5 June, when Egyptian forces engaged us by air and land, bombarding the villages of Kissufim, Nahal-Oz and Ein Hasheloshah we knew that our limit of safety had been reached, and perhaps passed. In accordance with its inherent right of self-defence as formulated in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, Israel responded defensively in full strength. Never in the history of nations has armed force been used in a more righteous or compelling cause.

Even when engaged with Egyptian forces, we still hoped to contain the conflict. Egypt was overtly bent on our destruction but we still hoped that others would not join the aggression. Prime Minister Eshkol, who for weeks had carried the heavy burden of calculation and decision, published and conveyed a message to other neighbouring States proclaiming:

"We shall not attack any country unless it opens war on us. Even now, when the mortars speak, we have not given up our quest for peace. We strive to repel all menace of terrorism and any

danger of aggression to ensure our security and our legitimate rights."

Israel Had No Desire To Expand Conflict

In accordance with this policy of attempting to contain the conflict, I yesterday invited General Bull, the Chairman of the Truce Supervision Organization, to inform the heads of the Jordanian State that Israel had no desire to expand the conflict beyond the unfortunate dimensions that it had already assumed and that if Israel were not attacked by Jordan, it would not attack and would act only in self-defence. It reached my ears that this message had been duly and faithfully conveyed and received. Nevertheless, Jordan decided to join the Egyptian posture against Israel and opened artillery attacks across the whole frontier, including Jerusalem. Those attacks are still in progress.

To the appeal of Prime Minister Eshkol to avoid any further extension of the conflict, Syria answered at 12.2 yesterday morning by bombing Megiddo from the air and bombing Deganya at 12.0 with artillery fire and kibbutz Ein Hamifrats and Koordani with long-range guns. But Jordan embarked on a much more total assault by artillery and aircraft along the entire front, with special emphasis on Jerusalem, to whose dangerous and noble ordeal yesterday I can bear personal witness.

Heavy Bombardment of Israel's Capital, Jerusalem

There has been bombing of houses; there has been a hit on the great new National Museum of Art; there has been a hit on the University and on Shaare Tsedek, the first hospital ever to have been established outside the ancient walls. Is this not an act of vandalism that deserves the condemnation of all mankind? And in the Knesset Building, whose construction had been movingly celebrated by the entire democratic world ten months ago, the Israeli Cabinet and Parliament met under heavy gunfire, whose echoes mingled at the end of our meeting with Hatikvah, the anthem of hope.

Thus throughout the day and night of 5 June, Jordan, which we had expressly invited to abstain from needless slaughter, became, to our surprise, and still remains, the most intense of all the belligerents. Death and injury, as so often in history, stalk Jerusalem's streets.

When the approaching Egyptian aircraft appeared on our radar screens, soon to be followed by artillery attacks on our villages near the Gaza Strip, I instructed Ambassador Rafael to inform the Security Council, in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter. I know that that involved arousing you, Mr. President, at a most uncongenial hour of the night, but we felt that the Security Council should be most urgently seized.

Israel Disconcerted by U.N. Role

I should, however, be less than frank if I were to conceal the fact that the Government and people of Israel have been disconcerted by some aspects of the United Nations role in this conflict. The sudden withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force was not accompanied, as it should have been, by due international consultations on the consequences of that withdrawal. Moreover, Israeli interests were affected. They were not adequately explored. No attempt was made, little time given, to help Israel surmount grave prejudice to its vital interests consequent on that withdrawal. After all, a new confrontation of forces suddenly arose. It suddenly had to be met. And at Sharm el-Sheikh at the entrance to the Strait of Tiran, legality walked out and blockade walked in. The peace of the world trembled. The United Nations had somehow been put into a position of leaving Sinai safe for belligerency.

It is not a question of sovereignty that is here involved. The United Nations has a right to ask that when it assumes a function, the termination of that function shall not take place in conditions that would lead to anti-Charter situations. I do not raise this point in order to linger upon that which is past; but because of Israel's general attitude to the peace-keeping functions of this Organization. I confess that my own attitude and those of my colleagues and of my fellow-citizens to the peace-keeping functions of the United Nations have been traumatically affected by this experience.

The United Nations Emergency Force rendered distinguished service. Nothing became it less than the manner of its departure. All gratitude and appreciation is owed to the individuals who sustained its action. If in the course of the recent combats United Nations personnel have fallen dead or wounded then I join my voice in an expression of the most sincere regret.

Future U.N. Role Problematic

The problem of the future role of a United Nations presence in conflicts such as these is much debated. We must ask ourselves a question that has arisen as a result of this experience. People in our country and in many countries ask: What is the use of a United Nations presence if it is, in effect, an umbrella which is taken away as soon as it begins to rain?

Surely, then, future arrangements for peace-keeping must depend more on the agreement and implementation by the parties themselves than on machinery which is totally at the mercy of the host country, so totally at its mercy as to be the instrument of its policies, whatever those policies may be.

We have lived through three dramatic weeks. Those weeks have brought into clear view the main elements of tension, and also the chief promise of relaxed tension in the future. The first link in the chain was the series of sabotage acts emanating from Syria. In October last year, the Security Council was already seized of this problem. A majority of its member States found it possible and necessary to draw attention to the Syrian Government's responsibility for altering that situation. Scarcely a day passed without a mine, a bomb, a hand-grenade or a mortar exploding on Israel's soil, sometimes with lethal or crippling effects; always with an unsettling psychological influence. In general, fourteen or fifteen such incidents would accumulate before a response was considered necessary. And this ceaseless accumulation of terrorist incidents in the name of what was called "popular war," together with responses which in the long run sometimes became inevitable, were for a long period the main focus of tension in the Middle East.

But then there came a graver source of tension in mid-May, when abnormal troop concentrations were observed in the Sinai Peninsula. For the ten years of relative stability beginning with March 1957 and ending with May 1967, the Sinai Desert had been free of Egyptian troops. In other words, a natural geographic barrier, a largely uninhabited space, separated the main forces of the two sides. It is true that in terms of sovereignty and law, any State has a right to put its armies in any part of its territory that it chooses. This, however, is not a legal question: It is a political and a security question. Experience in many parts of the world, not least in our own, demonstrates that massive armies in close proximity to each other, against a background of a

doctrine of belligerency and accompanying threats by one army to annihilate the other, create an inflammatory situation.

We were puzzled in Israel by the relative lack of preoccupation on the part of friendly Governments and international agencies with this intense concentration which found its reflection in precautionary concentrations on our side. My Government proposed, at least two weeks ago, the concept of a parallel and reciprocal reduction of forces on both sides of the frontier. We elicited no response, and certainly no action.

International Waterway Closed

To these grave sources of tension — the sabotage and terrorist movement, emanating mostly from Syria, and the heavy troop concentrations accompanied by dire, apocalyptic threats in Sinai — there was added in the third week of May the most electric shock of all. This was the closure of the international waterway consisting of the Strait of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba. It is not difficult to understand why this incident had a more drastic impact than others. In 1957 the maritime nations, within the framework of the United Nations General Assembly, correctly enunciated the doctrine of free and innocent passage through the Strait. Now, when that doctrine was proclaimed — and, incidentally, not challenged by the Egyptian representative at that time — it was little more than an abstract principle for the maritime world. For Israel it was a great but still unfulfilled prospect. It was not yet a reality. But during the ten years in which we and the other States of the maritime community have relied upon that doctrine and upon established usage, the principle has become a reality, consecrated by hundreds of sailings under dozens of flags and the establishment of a whole complex of commerce and industry and communication. A new dimension has been added to the map of the world's communications. On that dimension we have constructed Israel's bridge toward the friendly States of Asia and Africa, a network of relationships which is the chief pride of Israel in the second decade of its independence.

All this, then, had grown up as an effective usage under the United Nations flag. Does Mr. Nasser really think that he can come upon the scene in ten minutes and cancel the established legal usage and interests of ten years?

There was in this wanton act a quality of malice. For surely the closing of the Strait of Tiran gave no benefit whatever to Egypt except the perverse joy of inflicting injury on others. It was an anarchic act, because it showed a total disregard for the law of nations, the application of which in this specific case had not been challenged for ten years. And it was an act of arrogance, because there are other nations in Asia and East Africa that trade with the Port of Elath, as they have every right to do, through the Strait of Tiran and across the Gulf of Aqaba. Other sovereign States from Japan to Ethiopia, from Thailand to Uganda, from Cambodia to Madagascar, have a sovereign right to decide for themselves whether they wish or do not wish to trade with Israel. These countries are not colonies of Cairo. They can trade with Israel or not trade with Israel as they wish, and President Nasser is not the policeman of other African and Asian States.

Here then was a wanton intervention in the sovereign rights of other States in the eastern half of the world to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to establish trade relations with either or both of the two ports at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba.

A Blockade Is An Act of War

When we examine the implications of this act, we have no cause to wonder that the international shock was great. There was another reason too for that shock. Blockades have traditionally been regarded, in the pre-Charter parlance, as acts of war. To blockade, after all, is to attempt strangulation — and sovereign States are entitled not to have their trade strangled. To understand how the State of Israel felt, one has merely to look around this table and imagine, for example, a foreign Power forcibly closing New York or Montreal, Boston or Marseilles, Toulon or Copenhagen, Rio or Tokyo or Bombay harbour. How would your Government react? What would you do? How long would you wait?

But Israel waited because of its confidence that the other maritime Powers and countries interested in this new trading pattern would concert their influence in order to re-establish a legal situation and to liquidate this blockade. We concerted action with them not because Israel's national interest was here abdicated. There will not be — there cannot be — an Israel without Elath. We cannot be expected to return to a dwarfed stature, with our face to the Mediterranean alone. In law and in history, peace and blockades have never coexisted. How could it

be expected that the blockade of Elath and a relaxation of tension in the Middle East could ever be brought into harmony?

Three Main Elements of Tension

These then were the three main elements in the tension: the sabotage movement; the blockade of the port; and, perhaps more imminent than anything else, this vast and purposeful encirclement movement, against the background of an authorized presidential statement announcing that the objective of the encirclement was to bring about the destruction and the annihilation of a sovereign State.

These acts taken together — the blockade, the dismissal of the United Nations force, and the heavy concentration in Sinai — effectively disrupted the *status quo* which had ensured a relative stability on the Egyptian-Israeli frontier for ten years. I do not use the words "relative stability" lightly, for while those elements of the Egyptian-Israeli relationship existed there was not one single incident of violence between Egypt and Israel for ten years. But suddenly this pattern of mutually accepted stability was smashed to smithereens. It is now the task of the Governments concerned to elaborate the new conditions of their co-existence. I think that much of this work should be done directly by these Governments themselves. Surely, after what has happened we must have better assurance than before, for Israel and the Middle East of peaceful coexistence. The question is whether there is any reason to believe that such a new era may yet come to pass. If I am sanguine on this point, it is because of a conviction that men and nations do behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives. Surely the other alternatives of war and belligerency have now been exhausted. And what has anybody gained from them? But in order that the new system of interstate relationships may flourish in the Middle East, it is important that certain principles be applied above and beyond the cease-fire to which the Security Council has given its unanimous support.

Israel Welcomes Appeal for Cease-Fire

Let me then say here that Israel welcomes the appeal for the cease-fire as formulated in this resolution. But I must point out that the implementation depends on the absolute and sincere acceptance and co-operation of the other parties, which, in our view, are responsible

for the present situation. And in conveying this resolution to my colleagues, I must at this moment point out that these other Governments have not used the opportunity yet to clarify their intentions.

I have said that the situation to be constructed after the cease-fire must depend on certain principles. The first of these principles surely must be the acceptance of Israel's Statehood and the total elimination of the fiction of its non-existence. It would seem to me that after 3,000 years the time has arrived to accept Israel's nationhood as a fact. Here is the only State in the international community which has the same territory, speaks the same language and upholds the same faith as it did 3,000 years ago.

And if, as everybody knows to be the fact, the universal conscience was in the last week or two most violently shaken at the prospect of danger to Israel, it was not only because there seemed to be a danger to a State. It was also because the State was Israel, with all that this ancient name evokes, teaches, symbolizes and inspires. How grotesque would be an international community which found room for 127 sovereign units and which did not acknowledge the sovereignty of that people which had given nationhood its deepest significance and its most enduring grace.

Israel's Successful Resistance Evokes Relief

No wonder, then, that when danger threatened we could hear a roar of indignation sweep across the world. No wonder that men in progressive movements and members of the scientific and humanistic cultures joined together in sounding an alarm bell about an issue that vitally affected the human conscience. And no wonder that a deep and universal sense of satisfaction and relief has accompanied the news of Israel's gallant and successful resistance.

But the central point remains the need to secure an authentic recognition by our neighbours of Israel's deep roots in the Middle Eastern reality. There is an intellectual tragedy in the failure of Arab leaders to come to grips, however reluctantly, with the depth and authenticity of Israel's roots in the life, the history, the spiritual experience and the culture of the Middle East.

This, then, is the first axiom. A much more conscious and uninhibited acceptance of Israel's Statehood is an axiom requiring no demonstration. There will never be a Middle East without an independent and sovereign State of Israel in its midst.

The second principle must be that of the peaceful settlement of disputes. The resolution now adopted falls within the concept of the peaceful settlement of disputes. I have already said that much could be done if the Governments of the area would embark much more on direct contacts. They must find their way to each other. After all, when there is conflict between them they come together face to face. Why should they not come together face to face to solve the conflict? On some occasions it would not be a bad idea to have the solution before, and therefore instead of, the conflict.

Not Backward to Belligerency — But Forward to Peace

When the Council discusses what is to happen after the cease-fire, we hear many formulae: back to 1956, back to 1948 — I understand our neighbours would wish to turn the clock back to 1947. The fact is, however, that most clocks move forward and not backward. This should be the case with the clock of Middle Eastern peace. Not backward to belligerency, but forward to peace.

The point was well made this evening by the representative of Argentina, who said: "The cease-fire must be followed immediately by the most energetic efforts to find a just and true peace in the Middle East." In a similar sense, the representative of Canada warned us against merely reproducing the old positions of conflict, without attempting to settle the underlying issues of Arab-Israeli coexistence. After all, many things in recent days have been mixed up with each other. Few things are what they were. And in order to create harmonious combinations of relationships, it is inevitable that the States should come together in negotiation.

Another factor in the harmony that we would like to see in the Middle East relates to external Powers. From these, and especially from the greatest amongst them, the small States of the Middle East — and most of them are small — ask for a rigorous support, not for individual States, but for specific principles; not to be for one State against other States, but to be for peace against war, for free commerce against

belligerency, for the pacific settlement of disputes against violent irredentist threats; in other words, to exercise an even-handed support for the integrity and independence of States and for the rights of States under the Charter of the United Nations and other sources of international law.

There are no two categories of States. The United Arab Republic, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon — not one of these has a single ounce or milligram of Statehood which does not adhere in equal measures to Israel itself.

Balanced Attitude Required From Other States

It is important that States outside our region apply a balanced attitude. They should not exploit temporary tensions and divergencies in the issues of global conflict. They should not seek to win gains by inflaming fleeting passions and they should strive to make a balanced distribution of their friendship amongst the States of the Middle East.

Now whether all the speeches of all the great Powers this evening meet this criterion, everybody, of course, can judge for himself. I do not propose to answer in detail all the observations of the representative of the Soviet Union. I had the advantage of hearing the same things in identical language a few days ago from his colleague, the Soviet Ambassador in Israel. I must confess that I was no more convinced this evening than I was the day before yesterday about the validity of this most vehement and one-sided denunciation. But surely world opinion, before whose tribunal this debate unrolls, can solve this question by posing certain problems to itself. Who was it that attempted to destroy a neighbouring State in 1948, Israel or its neighbours? Who now closes an international waterway to the port of a neighbouring State, Israel or the United Arab Republic? Does Israel refuse to negotiate a peace settlement with the Arab States, or do they refuse to do so with it? Who disrupted the 1957 pattern of stability, Israel or Egypt? Did troops of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait and Algeria surround Israel in this menacing confrontation, or has any distinguished representative seen some vast Israeli colossus surrounding the area between Morocco and Kuwait?

I raise these points of elementary logic. Of course, a great Power can take refuge in its power from the exigencies of logic. All of us in our

youth presumably recounted La Fontaine's fable, *La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure*. But here, after all, there is nobody who is more or less strong than others; we sit here around the table on the concept of sovereign equality. But I think we have an equal duty to bring substantive proof for any denunciation that we make, each of the other.

These are grave times. And yet they may have fortunate issue. This could be the case if those who decided three weeks ago to disrupt the *status quo* would ask themselves what the benefits have been. As he looks around him at the arena of battle, at the wreckage of planes and tanks, at the collapse of intoxicated hopes, might not an Egyptian ruler ponder whether anything was achieved by that disruption? What has it brought but strife, conflict with other powerful interests, and the stern criticism of progressive men throughout the world?

Israel in recent days has proved its steadfastness and vigour. It is now willing to demonstrate its instinct for peace. Let us build a new system of relationships from the wreckage of the old. Let us discern across the darkness the vision of a better and a brighter dawn.

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